

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 AF-08 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01
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FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 994
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT
AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 0790

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PINT MO
SUBJECT: KING NAMES NEW INTERIOR MINISTER

1. A FEB 10 GOVERNMENT COMMUNIQUE ANNOUNCED THAT MINISTER OF STATE FOR COOPERATION MOHAMED BENHIMA HAD BEEN SHIFTED TO HEAD THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR WITH THE TITLE OF MINISTER OF STATE. THE COMMUNIQUE STATED THAT PRESENT INTERIOR MINISTER, MOHAMED ECHIGUER, HAD ASKED THE KING TO RELIEVE HIM SO THAT HE COULD RUN FOR PARLIAMENT. ECHIGUER WAS GIVEN BENHIMA'S FORMER MINISTRY.

2. BENHIMA THUS RESUMES CHARGE OF THE MINISTRY HE HEADED FROM 1972 TO MAY 1973, WHEN HE RELINQUISHED THE INTERIOR PORTFOLIO FOR HEALTH REASONS. ECHIGUER, A BERBER POLITICIAN ASSOCIATED WITH MOUVEMENT POPULAIRE LEADER MAHJOUBI AHERDAN, HAS BEEN A COLORLESS AND UNIMPOSING FIGURE IN INTERIOR. THE KING WAS REPORTEDLY UNHAPPY WITH THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR'S HANDLING OF THE NOV 12 LOCAL ELECTIONS, WHICH PROVOKED ENERGETIC OPPOSITION PARTY ALLEGATIONS OF GOVERNMENT ABUSES AND MISMANAGEMENT.

3. BENHIMA TOLD THE AMBASSADOR OF THE IMPENDING CHANGE IN THE
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STRICTEST CONFIDENCE TWO DAYS BEFORE THE ANNOUNCEMENT. BENHIMA OBSERVED THAT THE KING WAS OBVIOUSLY SEEKING TO MAINTAIN ORDER IN THE COMING WEEKS, THE IMPLICATION BEING THAT THE PROMISED PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, EXPECTED GOVERNMENT CHANGES, AND ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES REQUIRED A STRONG HAND AT THE TILLER. PRIOR TO THE FEB 10 ANNOUNCEMENT, BENHIMA DID NOT KNOW WHETHER HE WOULD BE ASKED TO RETAIN THE COOPERATION MINISTRY, CREATED

FOR HIM IN 1973. HE ALSO SAID THAT THE KING WAS CONSIDERING CONCURRENTLY GIVING HIM THE DEFENSE PORTFOLIO, A FUNCTION ASSUMED DIRECTLY BY THE KING FOLLOWING THE 1972 COUP ATTEMPT. BENHIMA SAID THAT HE WOULD ATTEMPT TO AVOID TAKING THIS LATTER POSITION, AT LEAST INITIALLY, NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF HIS HEALTH, BUT BECAUSE OF CRITICISM THAT COULD ARISE WITH HIS HAVING CONTROL OF BOTH DEFENSE AND INTERNAL SECURITY FORCES.

4. BENHIMA HAS HELD SEVERAL MINISTERIAL PORTFOLIOS SINCE INDEPENDENCE, INCLUDING ONE STINT AS PRIME MINISTER FROM 1967-69, AND IS ONE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S MOST CAPABLE AND INTELLIGENT MINISTERS. ALTHOUGH HE HAS BEEN THE TARGET OF OCCASIONAL CHARGES OF CORRUPTION, HE IS THOUGHT TO HAVE KEPT RELATIVELY CLEAN AND BECAUSE OF HIS INTEGRITY AND FIRMNESS COMMANDS WIDE RESPECT. HIS RELATIONS WITH THE PALACE HAVE BEEN CONSISTENTLY GOOD AND HE CONTINUES TO BE ONE OF THE KING'S CLOSEST AND MOST TRUSTED POLITICAL ADVISORS. HIS NOMINATION TO THE INTERIOR JOB FOLLOWING SKHIRAT IS ONLY ONE OF MANY INDICATIONS OF THE CONFIDENCE WHICH THE KING PLACES IN HIM, AND THE KING'S CONSIDERING GIVING HIM TWO OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST SENSITIVE SECURITY PORTFOLIOS AT THE SAME TIME WOULD BE FURTHER PROOF OF THIS TRUST.

5. FROM THE U.S. POINT OF VIEW, BENHIMA'S APPOINTMENT TO THIS IMPORTANT MINISTRY WOULD BE A PLUS. HE HAS BEEN VERY SOLICITOUS OVER THE YEARS IN MAINTAINING CLOSE TIES WITH AMERICAN AMBASSADORS AND HAS REPEATEDLY PROVED TO BE A STRONG FRIEND OF THE U.S. IN THE MINISTRY OF COOPERATION, HE HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY HELPFUL AND EFFECTIVE IN PURSUING U.S. TECHNICAL

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ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.

6. BENHIMA HAS PRIVATELY EXPRESSED RESERVE TO THE AMBASSADOR AS TO THE PACE OF MOROCCO'S DEMOCRATIZATION. ALTHOUGH IT IS TOO SOON TO TELL HOW THE OPPOSITION WILL REACT, WE SEE HIS APPOINTMENT AS A SIGN THAT THE KING INTENDS TO CARRY THROUGH THE ELECTORAL EXPERIENCE AND WISHES IT TO BE ADMINISTERED EFFECTIVELY, AT THE SAME TIME GIVING WARNING THAT HE WILL BROOK NO EXCESSES. POLITICAL PARTY LEADERS HAVE BEEN CONVOKED TO THE PALACE ON FEB 14 -- THE FIRST SUBSTANTIVE MEETING SINCE NOV -- A MOVE WHICH ALSO SUGGESTS THAT THE KING IS LAUNCHING PREPARATIONS FOR THE LAST STAGE OF THE ELECTORAL EXPERIMENT.

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